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## THE PROPHETS AS MODELS FOR THE PREACHER

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One of the most conspicuous gains of modern Old Testament scholarship is the rediscovery of the prophets. For centuries these were but honored names, the bearers of certain golden words that shone out lustrous over the ages, while their own personalities remained in shadow. But now the prophets stand forth in the clear light of history, as the really great figures of the older Covenant, the men through whose word and influence above all else the vision broadened toward the perfect day. The place they occupied in ancient Israel corresponds broadly with that of the preacher of the gospel. A study of the ideals they upheld, and the spirit in which they carried forward their work, may thus prove helpful to those intrusted with this supreme commission in our age.

A brief glance at the names borne by the prophet may suggest at the outset what he really was and is. The widest in its range, a word found occasionally in the historical literature, is *'ish 'elohim*, "man of God." The prophet is, therefore, in a special sense the friend of the living God, one consecrated also, heart and soul, to his service. The more spiritual aspect of this intimacy is emphasized by the old word *rô'eh* or "seer." One cannot, it is true, claim for the original seers the deep spirituality of later prophets. They were more nearly akin to the augurs or diviners of other nations, men who interpreted the will of heaven by various omens or signs. And probably their gifts of insight were applied more frequently to quite mundane affairs, like the whereabouts of lost asses, than to the weightier matters of the Kingdom. The name appears, indeed, to have fallen into discredit. Yet the essential idea involved in it was taken up and consecrated afresh by the prophets. Thus Amos uses the very stem *ra'ah* for his seeing of his visions. And, though the specific term *rô'eh* was avoided, the

nearly related *hōzeh* or “gazer” was freely applied to the prophets. It was, indeed, the *hāzôn* or “vision” that made a man the prophet of God. The prophet is thus essentially a seer, one who has stood in the council-chamber of the Eternal and gazed on things almost too wonderful for utterance. And yet the prophet had to tell out what he saw. This more outward side of his activity is indicated by the parallel term *nābî*, the technical word for “prophet.” This term is most probably derived from the old Semitic root for “bubbling up.” The prophet, consequently, is one whose words pour forth with eager, impetuous, irresistible force. The first appearance of the prophetic bands in Israel is in perfect harmony with the root sense of the word. The prophets that sweep across the pages of Samuel and Kings are ecstasies, men lifted out of themselves by the spirit of enthusiasm for Yahweh and his cause, so completely, indeed, that they seemed no other than madmen to their more sober-minded fellows. The great prophetic figures of the later Kingdom stood immeasurably above these excited, frenzied bands. Yet in them, too, was the same inward compulsion. Those who had seen the vision of the King in his beauty were constrained to tell it out to their people. As Jeremiah says, the word of God was like a fire in their bones, which burned till it found expression.

In both respects the prophets set the type for all true preaching. Behind all our public utterances there must be the vision of God and truth; else our words will become formal and unreal, mere phrases that cannot reach the heart. And if there be this vision, our words will come forth with a certain irresistible impulse. This is by no means to be identified with fiery eloquence or easily flowing rhetoric. The prophets of Israel were not all orators of the stamp of an Isaiah. Among them were found also gentle spirits like Hosea and Jeremiah, for whom utterance was a pain almost intolerable. The prophet of today may be as weak in speech as these men felt themselves to be, and may be called to labor all his days in some quiet, obscure sphere of service, where he has no opportunity to play a large part in the coming of the Kingdom. But if he has his vision of things eternal, and speaks out of the heart what he has seen and known, his words will carry

the same conviction as passed from the prophets of old. They have come from the heart, and will likewise go to the heart.

From this it follows that the prophets were true to themselves and their own experience of God. They form a golden link running through the history of Revelation. Yet perhaps no such succession of men were more widely apart in character and word. The stern, unbending Amos preached of the day of the Lord and his righteousness. The broken heart of Hosea poured forth words of love and grace. The kingly figure of Isaiah thrilled his hearers with his glorious visions of God's sovereign holiness. The democratic Micah concerned himself mainly with the simple duties of life. Jeremiah turned men's thoughts to the new covenant of the spirit. And Deutero-Isaiah came to the despondent exiles with the good tidings of comfort and salvation. The range of their preaching may thus have been narrowed. But just because of their narrowness the waters were irresistible in depth and swiftness. And thus, too, their volume increased with the ages. Each prophet emphasized one aspect of the divine character. Thus his infinite fulness came to be understood in ever richer measure. And the eyes of the prophet were steadily fixed on the broadening revelation of the future. The true prophet was always a progressive. He might call men back to the old paths; but this was not in order to keep them standing still, but to send them forward, and still forward, on the ways of righteousness. He himself was invariably to be found in the van. He recognized, indeed, his spiritual unity with the older prophets, and studied their words with zealous interest. But he would be no parrot voice repeating their oracles. The broad distinction between the true and false prophets was, in fact, that the false harped forever on the same old string, stealing their words from the greater men of old, or even from one another, while the true prophets gave from their spiritual treasury things both new and old. Nor did they hesitate to lift the prophetic tradition, if need were, to higher planes. Amos and Hosea refused to be bound by Elisha's lower ideals of morality, and made the very deeds of bloodshed which he commanded in the name of God the cause of the fiery visitation that was about to fall on the people. And Jeremiah shrunk not

from denouncing as false prophets the men who held fast to Isaiah's great faith in the inviolability of Zion. The link that bound the true prophets was no hard-and-fast likeness in word, but a real spiritual harmony that allowed for endless diversity of expression.

The prophet of today must be as true to himself as these men were. He will not cut himself off from the great traditions of preaching, nor need he fear to be found studying the words of the master-preachers both of yesterday and today. Exponents of other arts go to the masters for insight and inspiration. And in the world of preaching the prophets have set us the same example. Only the preacher must be himself, and must assimilate the thoughts and style of others in order to perfect his own. That which counts most in preaching—in our own age as in the prophets'—is the personal note that comes from sincere conviction and experience. And for the same reason the preacher of today must be as progressive as the prophets were. God is still unveiling himself in as many ways as of old. He may have given us the full light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ, but we are yet far from having exhausted the meaning of this revelation. Each age has seen some new vision of truth and holiness in that face. And on us too fresh rays of his glory are shining. The true prophet is he whose eyes are open to the growing light, who believes that the Spirit of God is in the forward march of truth, and who takes his place loyally in the ranks of those who follow the call of the Spirit.

In keeping with the intense reality of the prophets' preaching is its practical appeal. We never find the prophets beating about the bush, contenting themselves with general phrases, or pointlessly denouncing the sins of other times. They were men of their own age, who faced the situation that immediately confronted them, and spoke forth their words of warning, hope, or comfort in direct relation to the needs of the time. Thus their preaching took on many different notes. We may thus learn from them to blend the accents of melting love and pity with the stern call of righteousness, to unite the serious responsibilities of the watchman with the tender care of the shepherd or pastor, and to lead men in reverent adoration to the presence-chamber of the Holy

One, even while we exalt his fatherly love and goodness. The prophets can teach us also how to link the personal appeal of the evangelist with the larger demand for social justice. It was, indeed, the latter element that bulked most largely in their preaching. The efflorescence of prophecy coincided with the brilliant national developments of the reigns of Jeroboam II and Uzziah, when the individual counted for little more than an isolated atom of the nation. And the religious ideal that inspired men like Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah was that of a righteous, pure, and holy nation. The individual emerged into full personal consciousness mainly as the result of the Exile; and now it was the duty of prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel to lead the bruised and sin-stricken individual back to the God of salvation, who would not merely forgive his backsliding, but would change the hard and stony heart into a heart of flesh. But even for an individualist like Ezekiel salvation was no self-centered blessing. The individual saints he gathered around him were to be the nucleus of a new spiritual community that should succeed to all the hopes and promises of the Israel of old. And, as later prophets emphasized, this newer Israel must commend its faith to the world even more by social right-doing than by personal holiness and purity.

In the spiral movement of history we appear to have reverted to another era of social interest and aspiration. And the prophet must be in living touch with the needs of the age. He will still, indeed, seek to win the individual soul to personal faith and holiness. But he must likewise help to give clarity and purpose to the vague strivings of the people after a higher national life. Here the prophets have much to teach us. They were not political economists who set themselves up as "judges and dividers" among men. But they held forth great ideals of national righteousness which they had seen with their own eyes in the presence of the Eternal, and for which they demanded effective expression in life. As models for the preacher who aims at awakening the public conscience of today, one may specially commend Amos, chaps. 3, 5, and 6, and that most heart-searching chap. 5 of Isaiah. In none of these passages have we ignorant or unwarranted interference with legitimate rights, but vital principles brought directly

to bear on moral and social life. The prophets' criticism of existing conditions turns mainly on unjust or unworthy ways of acquiring and spending wealth. Of course flagrant dishonesty comes in for unsparing condemnation. Amos hurls out the wrath of God on such as make the ephah small and the shekel great, and deal unjustly with balances of deceit, on such too as grind the faces of the poor, exploiting their poverty to enrich themselves. Isaiah has a penetrating exposure of the social crime of monopoly. Those men who join field to field, and house to house, till there is no more room in the land for any but themselves, are guilty of two sins: depopulation, and manipulation of prices for the crushing of the poor, resulting also in the moral and spiritual rot of the monopolist himself. But the prophets deal as seriously with the use of wealth. In their eyes wealth is the gift of God, and is therefore to be employed for high and worthy purposes. The misapplication of wealth to secure favors in the law-courts, or positions of honor to which the aspirants have no just claim—in other words, graft—is sin against the Lord God of hosts. And the spending of fortunes on the pure gratification of selfish lusts and pleasures is equally sinful in the eyes of God. The prophets lift up their voices in condemnation, not merely of intemperance and impurity, but also of foolish idleness. Thus Amos turns with splendid irony on those who sat long hours at the table, on their richly embroidered cushions, toying with their toothsome morsels, the stalled calves and lambs of the flock, and sipping their drained and perfumed wines, twanging the while on their viols, and singing silly songs to the music, fancying themselves very Davids in prowess and skill, while they had no thought for the affliction of Joseph.

But the words of the prophets are by no means all of condemnation. The older conception of prophecy as essentially foretelling of the future has passed away before a juster view of its religious significance. Yet this was one element of the prophets' task. While they urged the present duty, they held out before their people visions of future glory or ruin, to encourage them on the ways of righteousness, or deter them from their wild onrush toward evil. It is remarkable how clearly and truly they dis-

cerned the broad lines of the future destiny of their people. But more significant, in the larger issue, were their visions of the final triumph of justice, truth, and peace. They no doubt foreshortened the time, expecting to see the dawn of the kingdom of God in their own age. But though the days have lengthened, the prophetic anticipations of a new earth from which war shall have vanished, and men shall be drawn together as brothers in the knowledge of God, and respect and affection for one another, when they shall work, too, no longer as machines, but as human beings, each one dwelling under his own vine and fig-tree, are abiding inspirations to all who labor for the Kingdom. In our preaching also there should be found a place for this vision of better days to come. Our hearers live too much in the valleys. In their engrossment with worldly duties and troubles they can often hardly see beyond them. Even our civic and social reformers can at times perceive nothing but the smoke of the battle. It should be our duty to lift them to the heights, from which they can look out, and see with prophets and reformers of other ages the brightening dawn of the glories to come, that they may return to their offices and workshops, their seats of judgment and places of administration, to work with surer, clearer purpose, and with unremitting enthusiasm, for purity, justice, and honor among men.